

# Light

A person is sitting on the shore of a lake, looking out at a sunset. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright orange and yellow glow that reflects on the water. The person is in silhouette, and their reflection is visible in the calm water. The sky is a deep orange, and the water is a dark, still surface.

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...on a New World

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Cover picture: Sunrise over Lake Ontario in Canada





## Editorial

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WE SOMETIMES HEAR the phrase used in the media '*it's a sign of the times*'. The phrase aptly sums up people's thoughts on the state of things in our so-called modern world. This includes the mindless violence and other crimes that afflict our society and the rising tide of terrorism. In the natural world this will include earthquakes, hurricanes and other disasters. All these things threaten our existence but have you thought why they are sometimes called '*signs of the times*'?

It may surprise you to know that the phrase '*signs of the times*' originates in some words of Jesus found in Matthew's gospel record. As on many occasions, Jesus was in conflict with the religious leaders of the Jews who came to him and '*testing him asked that he would show them a sign from heaven*' [Matthew 16.1]. We are not told why they asked for a sign, although Jesus' reply indicates that they were not genuine in their request for he describes them as '*Hypocrites*' (the original Greek here means an actor in a play). In asking this question, the Pharisees were in effect play-acting or concealing their evil intentions under a cloak of piety. The reply of Jesus no doubt surprised them. He said:

"...When it is evening you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red'; and in the morning, 'It will be foul weather today, for the sky is red and threatening.' Hypocrites! You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot discern **the signs of the times**" [Matthew 16.2,3].

The message of Jesus for these religious leaders was very clear. If they had been alert to '*the signs of the times*' they would have realised that their nation was doomed. The words of the prophets of Israel had foretold the coming of their Messiah but they had also predicted that he would be rejected by his people. Jesus went on to confirm this in the words: '*A wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah*' [Matthew 16.4].

What was the explanation of these words? Jesus gives the answer in Matthew chapter 12. Jonah was a sign to the people of Nineveh – by a miracle of surviving three days and three nights in the belly of that great fish he was able to preach to the Ninevites. As a result of his preaching they repented and were spared from destruction at that time. Jesus on the other hand was rejected and crucified but God raised him from the dead after three days and three nights '*in the heart of the earth*' [Matthew 12.40,41]. The Jews rejection of their Messiah brought judgement on them and the end of their economy. In AD 70 Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans and the Jews were sold as slaves and dispersed throughout the Roman Empire.

In this issue of 'Light on a New World' we commence a new series of articles entitled '*Signs of the Times*'. These '*signs*' alert the Bible student to events in the world which are leading up to a time when God will intervene in human affairs. Jesus said to his disciples '*Take heed, watch and pray; for you do not know when the time is*' and he added '*And what I say to you, I say to all: Watch!*' [Mark 13.33,37].

Will you be among those who observe the '*signs*' and prepare now for that great day of our Lord's coming?

Editor



# Signs of the Times

## The Middle East - Peace or War?

IN DECEMBER 2001 speaking of the test that Israel faces, Ariel Sharon noted:

‘Arafat is responsible for everything that happens here. He has chosen the path of terrorism...Arafat is the greatest obstacle to peace and stability in the Middle East. We have seen this in the past, are seeing it in the present - and will unfortunately probably continue to see this in the future.’



Now that Arafat is dead and a new Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas has come on the scene, hopes for a peaceful settlement to the current strife have been rekindled. In February this year Mr Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon agreed a cease-fire at a summit held at the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheikh. However, despite

this agreement, militant Palestinian groups did not formally join the truce and just two weeks later a Palestinian suicide bomber attacked a nightclub in Tel Aviv.

Despite this, Mr Sharon decided on a unilateral plan to withdraw Israeli settlers from the Gaza Strip. This involved the resettlement of eight thousand five hundred Jewish settlers from 21 settlements, plus re-locating the troops protecting them.

Under the plan, the Palestinian National Authority led by Mahmoud Abbas will govern the territory. A special force trained by Egypt is to keep order. There will be an end to the travel restrictions in occupied Gaza but Israel will continue to control the border, coast and air space. Although for a couple of weeks after the withdrawal a comparative calm persisted, it has been short lived as just a few of the recent events in 2005 show:

- 23rd September: A large number of rockets fired by Palestinian militants, land in Israel.
- 26th September: Israeli air strikes hit buildings that Israel considers were being used to store weapons.
- 17th October: Israel re-imposed restrictions on Palestinians travelling through the West Bank following the killing on 16th October of three Jewish settlers.
- 20th October: Soldiers shot dead a Palestinian man throwing petrol bombs; on the same day the Al Jazeera news agency accused '*dozens of Jewish extremists*' of storming the Al Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount and clashing with Muslim guards.
- 27th October: At least five people died and about 30 were wounded in a suicide bomb attack in the northern Israeli town of Hadera.



- 28th October Israel launched missile strikes on Gaza in retaliation for the suicide bombing, killing eight Palestinians.

### CAN THERE REALLY BE PEACE?

Palestinians still want an independent nation with Jerusalem as the capital. On 19th October after a meeting with Mahmoud Abbas, President Bush commented that the prospect of Palestinians gaining a State could be closer than ever before, adding: *'We expect all parties to adhere to the road map, and we're holding people to account on the pledges that both the Palestinians and the Israelis have made.'*

The fast changing nature of politics in the Middle East may well have brought about other significant events by the time this article goes to print. However, one thing is certain, there are many major problems that lie ahead, notably the issues of handing land over to the Palestinians in exchange for peace and the major issue of Jerusalem. As Ariel Sharon noted, the city *'is the eternal capital of the State of Israel, a united Jerusalem'*.

No matter what uncertainties the immediate future may bring for Israel, no matter what the nations may decide, the ultimate outcome for the State of Israel and the city of Jerusalem is already known. But before we consider the future, we must take a brief look at the past.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Abraham, the progenitor of the Jewish nation was promised by God that his descendants would grow to be a great nation as numerous as the stars in the sky and that they would possess the land then known as Canaan. Further, he was promised that through one of his descendants all nations would be blessed and that this descendant would rule over all his enemies [Genesis 12.1-3; 13.15,16; 15.5; 22.17,18].

After the time of Abraham the Jews were enslaved in Egypt, until God by the hand of Moses, led the fledgling nation of Israel towards

'The Promised Land' (the land of Canaan), just as God had promised to Abraham. However, the possession of Canaan was conditional upon Israel displaying the same faith and trust in God that Abraham showed. If they broke the covenant that God had established with them and turned away from Him by following the example of the idolatrous nations around them, then they would be cast out of their land.

'...it shall come to pass, if you do not obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all his commandments and his statutes which I command you today...You shall be left few in number, whereas you were as the stars of heaven in multitude, because you would not obey the voice of the LORD your God... the LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other...among those nations you shall find no rest, nor shall the sole of your foot have a resting place...' [Deuteronomy 28.15,62,64,65].

All this happened to the Jews just as it was prophesied and they were displaced from their ancient homeland. The Jewish 'Diaspora' (Greek word meaning dispersion) commenced in AD 70 when the Roman armies overran their land, destroyed Jerusalem and scattered the Jews throughout the Roman Empire. Thus commenced a long period of the Jews wandering throughout the nations of the world, during which time they faced many persecutions and as prophesied, found no rest or permanent home.

Despite their dispersion the Jews still exist as a distinct people. In commenting on this situation, the American author Mark Twain wrote:

'The Egyptians, the Babylonians, and the Persians rose, filled the planet with sound and splendour, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed, and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their



torch high for a time but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, survived them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?"

[Mark Twain, 1897]

### THE JEWS ARE GOD'S WITNESSES

*'What is the secret of his immortality?'* The answer is simple. Despite all that they have endured the Jews are still God's people, they are His witnesses. The prophet Isaiah records:

*'You are my witnesses, says the LORD, And my servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe me, and understand that I am he. Before me there was no God formed, nor shall there be after me...therefore you are my witnesses, says the LORD, that I am God.'* [Isaiah 43:10-12]

The very existence of the Jews as a separate distinct people after nearly 2,000 years in exile is a witness to the very existence of God and the truth of His Word. God promised that He would watch over and protect His people ensuring their survival saying: *'I am with you, says the LORD, to save you; though I make a full end of all nations where I have scattered you, yet I will not make a complete end of you.'* [Jeremiah 30:11]. Further, we read that He will restore Israel to their own land again, that the ancient cities will be rebuilt and the land will be cultivated:

*'...I will gather you from the peoples, assemble you from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel'* [Ezekiel 11.17].

‘I will bring back the captives of my people Israel; they shall build the waste cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink wine from them; they shall also make gardens and eat fruit from them. I will plant them in their land, and no longer shall they be pulled up from the land I have given them, says the LORD your God’

[Amos 9.14,15].

However, this will not be accomplished because the Jews are worthier than other nations, nor for their sakes but for the sake of His holy name and the covenant made with Abraham. Through the prophet Ezekiel God says:

‘I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations wherever they went...I do not do this for your sake, O house of Israel, but for my holy name’s sake, which you have profaned among the nations wherever you went...the nations shall know that I am the LORD, says the Lord GOD, when I am hallowed in you before their eyes. For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land.’

[Ezekiel 36.21-24]

### THE RETURN OF THE LORD JESUS

Now the restoration of the nation of Israel was spoken of by the Lord Jesus as one of the signs that would herald his return and the setting up of the Kingdom of God on the earth.

Jesus spoke to his disciples about the signs that would herald his return saying, *‘when these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near’* [Luke 21.28]. Jesus told them a parable saying:

‘Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. When they are already budding, you see and know for yourselves that summer is now near. So you likewise, when you see these things happening, know that the kingdom of God is near’ [Luke 21.27-31].

In the Scriptures, trees are often used as symbols to illustrate nations [for example Ezekiel 31.3,4] and the fig tree is a symbol often applied to Israel [Hosea 9.10; Luke 13.6-9]. Thus in the parable, when the fig tree in particular put forth green shoots, then the summer of Christ’s return would be near. Within modern history Israel has put forth shoots, for they are an independent nation once again after nearly 2,000 years of exile.

Another sign that Jesus spoke about concerned the city of Jerusalem. Jesus said of the Jews: *‘they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led away captive into all nations. And Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled’* [Luke 21.24]. The Jews have been back in their own land since 1948 and in control of Jerusalem since 1967.

Discerning followers of Christ will see these events as modern day *‘signs of the times’*. They will realise that God is still in control of world events and that what the prophets said so long ago is now coming to pass. Before the eyes of the world these signs heralding the end of Gentile times and the imminent return of the Lord Jesus Christ, have actually happened.

#### THE FUTURE FOR ISRAEL

Earlier in this article the question was asked: ‘Can there really be peace?’ In the immediate future it appears that terrorism and strife will continue. The Palestinians will continue to seek to possess Jerusalem and along with other nations such as Iran, will seek the destruction of the State of Israel. It appears almost impossible that the ‘City of



Peace' will ever know an end to strife. Yet God is in control and Israel is *'the apple of his eye'* [Deuteronomy 32.10; Zechariah 2.8]. He will protect His people and His city.

So what does the future hold for Israel and for Jerusalem? The following words of the prophet Isaiah summarise the time of peace that is to come. God says through the prophet:

'...be glad and rejoice forever in what I create; For behold, I create Jerusalem as a rejoicing, and her people a joy. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and joy in my people; the voice of weeping shall no longer be heard in her, nor the voice of crying...They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat...they shall be the descendants of the blessed of the LORD, and their offspring with them. It shall come to pass that before they call, I will answer; and while they are still speaking, I will hear' [Isaiah 65.18-24]

Will you believe *'the signs of the times'*? Will you prepare for the return of the Lord Jesus Christ?

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*(Editors note: Since this article was written, Ariel Sharon has been taken to hospital for brain surgery after suffering a major stroke. Even if he survives, he is not expected to return to his former office as Prime Minister of Israel. The peace process which he set in motion has again been jeopardised by this unexpected change in the Middle East political scene.)*

# The Law of Moses

## Its relevance today

### The Ten Commandments

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YOU MAY HAVE heard the old saying that *'Rules are for the guidance of wise men and the obedience of fools'*. It is a saying with some insight into human nature. Wise men would see the merit of rules and would always be eager to comply. But fools will question the need for rules and why rules should apply to them. The attitude of foolish people will result in them ignoring the rules that will eventually put them in conflict with the authorities. Although it is possible that some may learn obedience to the rules having suffered the penalties of breaking them, it is far better to follow the examples of wise men.

A review of the world around us will reveal a society that is descending into moral decline, a sick society that in the main is oblivious to what the future holds. We live in a world of widespread violence that has become a characteristic of modern life. Murder, assault and rape have increased dramatically. There are bombings, shootings and similar acts of violence. Terrorists continue to slaughter at random in the name of their cause. Drug addiction is rising, resulting in an increase in crime to support the habit. Alcohol addiction is increasing leading to drunkenness and violent behaviour. Teenage pregnancies and divorce have resulted in more one-parent families, eroding traditional family values. Relationships outside of marriage are accepted by a generation that no longer recognises the right of God to establish what is right and wrong.

The Bible is a very special book, full of divine wisdom and guidance, passed down through many generations. It contains a divine code of right and wrong concerning man's relationship with God and with other people. The first five books of the Bible were recorded by Moses and are often referred to as 'The Law of Moses'. The Jews were required to observe these laws throughout their generations as part of the covenant with their God.

The Bible contains sound moral and ethical codes. It also contains hygiene and quarantine procedures, to maintain the good health within a large close knit community. But within these codes and procedures there are patterns or types that reveal a spiritual message as guidance for those who seek to understand them. The prophet Isaiah wrote: *'To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them'* [Isaiah 8.20] and the Apostle Paul assures us that *'All Scripture is given by inspiration of God'* [2 Timothy 3.16]. These important statements need to be taken seriously because the words are God given.

Today many countries all over the world have incorporated certain aspects of the Ten Commandments into their national laws. But it is often the detail that reveals the differences between God's commands and those that man has adapted for his own convenience as agreed by the State. If God's commands were followed more closely there would be greater harmony with less problems in the world.

The Children of Israel were led out by Moses from captivity in Egypt, into the wilderness of Sinai around 1500 BC. Moses received the Ten Commandments from God on Mount Horeb and it was there that Moses was given laws to guide the newly constituted nation of Israel after leaving the darkness of Egyptian idolatry.

The Jews were required to obey not just the Ten Commandments but the whole of the Law of Moses. These requirements were to be kept by the nation of Israel as part of the covenant or agreement



between them and their God. However, when Christ came to fulfil that Law, through his mission as their Saviour, there was no longer a need for it to be kept by the Jews. The Apostle Paul describes the mission of Jesus as *'having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. (The Law of Moses) And he has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross'* [Colossians 2.14].

What then was the purpose of the Ten Commandments that were given to Moses? In his letter to the Galatians, the Apostle Paul explains how the Law of Moses was given because of transgressions and that it acted as a *'tutor'* to lead believing Jews to Christ:

*'But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterwards be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus'* [Galatians 3.23-26].

With these New Testament verses in mind we can summarise the Ten Commandments listed in Exodus chapter 20 as follows:

1. 'You shall have no other gods before me.'
2. 'You shall not make for yourself any carved image...'
3. 'You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain...'
4. 'Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.'
5. 'Honour your father and your mother...'
6. 'You shall not murder.'
7. 'You shall not commit adultery.'
8. 'You shall not steal.'
9. 'You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour'
10. 'You shall not covet...'

The Ten Commandments can be divided into two groups - firstly those that concern our relationship with God and secondly those that concern our relationship with each other.

For example, the second commandment forbade the making and worshipping of idols. Failure to adhere to this second commandment also broke the first commandment concerning the worship of the one true God. We read in Exodus chapter 20:

‘You shall not make for yourself any carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love me and keep my commandments.’

*[Exodus 20.4-6]*

This commandment is quite clear – the Israelites were not to make a likeness of anything seen in the earth, sea or sky. But is there any evidence in the New Testament that supports continuing this commandment to turn away from idols? The Apostle Paul wrote to the 1st century believers at Thessalonica:

‘For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith towards God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything. For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from

the dead, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come' [1 Thessalonians 1.8-10].

The Apostle reminded the Thessalonians how the Word of the Lord had changed the lives of those in Macedonia and Achaia. They had witnessed that the 1<sup>st</sup> century believers had '*turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God*'. The Apostle John was also concerned about the idols that were present in Gentile cities and pleaded with those early Gentile converts: '*Little children, keep yourselves from idols* [1 John 5.21]. In other words it was important for the early church to have nothing to do with idols.

Today, the followers of Christ also need to consider this commandment in the many other ways it can present itself. We should be especially careful of the '*idols*' of this present age. By this we mean those things that we may idolise by giving them our fullest attention, as well as spending both time and money in their pursuit. Followers of Jesus are required to keep the spirit of the second commandment, as the Apostle Paul reminded the 1<sup>st</sup> century believers at Corinth:

'Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral **nor idolaters** nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. **And that is what some of you were...**'

[1 Corinthians 6.9-11 NIV].

Idolaters break the first two commandments and are therefore classed among the wicked who will not inherit the kingdom of God. But Paul in writing to the Corinthians in this passage refers to evil practices that break six of the Ten Commandments and his warning is that those who offend in any of them '*will not inherit the kingdom of God*'. There is no sense in debating these issues because the fact



cannot be altered - this is the standard that God requires. These divine requirements are not for negotiation by mortal men and women.

In Mark chapter 12 we have on record the answer of Jesus to a question about the first commandment. It was asked by one of the religious leaders who were trying *'to catch him in his words'* [Mark 12.13]. Jesus answered the question by referring to the Law of Moses:

'The first of all the commandments is: 'Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.'

[Mark 12.29-31].

This summary of the Commandments was the answer the scribe willingly accepted as being more important than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices required by the Law of Moses. However there can be no doubt that the words of Jesus not only endorsed but amplified in greater detail what was required by that first Commandment given to Moses - *'You shall have no other gods before me'*. The answer that Jesus gave included two quotations from the Old Testament:

'Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.' [Deuteronomy 6.4,5]

'You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD.'

[Leviticus 19.18]

It has been suggested that the Ten Commandments were replaced by Jesus with these two all embracing commandments. However this ignores the important words of Jesus to the rich young man in Matthew chapter 19. This young man was earnestly seeking eternal life and had come to Jesus to obtain an answer from him:

‘Now behold, one came and said to him, “Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?” So he said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but one, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.” He said to him, “Which ones?” Jesus said, “You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness, Honour your father and your mother, and, You shall love your neighbour as yourself” [Matthew 19.16-19].

Now if we look carefully at those verses again we will see that Jesus had covered at least seven of those Ten Commandments. So let’s remind ourselves how many of the Commandments listed on page 13 were endorsed by Jesus and his Apostles in the verses we have looked at:

- |   |               |
|---|---------------|
| 1. ‘You shall have no other gods before me.’        | Mark 12.29    |
| 2. ‘You shall not make...any carved image.’         | 1Cor. 6.9     |
| 3. ‘You shall not take the name of ...God in vain.’ |               |
| 4. ‘Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.’     |               |
| 5. ‘Honour your father and your mother.’            | Matthew 19.19 |
| 6. ‘You shall not murder.’                          | Matthew 19.18 |
| 7. ‘You shall not commit adultery.’                 | Matthew 19.18 |
| 8. ‘You shall not steal.’                           | Matthew 19.18 |
| 9. ‘You shall not bear false witness...’            | Matthew 19.18 |
| 10. ‘You shall not covet.’                          | Matthew 19.19 |

We have established that Jesus and the Apostles confirmed the importance of keeping eight of the ten commandments. We now need to consider the remaining two commandments.

Firstly, what is the relevance of the third commandment? There are many ways in which the name of God is misused. We often come in contact with those who are unable to express themselves without using inappropriate words to assert their views. They may also use words such as God or Jesus Christ, without having any commitment to a religious belief. On the other hand those who have a religious belief may make a false claim of being sent by God. They may declare false doctrines while claiming to have God's approval. We can see in both examples the misuse of God's name. But what did Jesus say about speech that will shed some light on this matter? These are his words, which form part of the sermon on the mount:

“Again, you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.’ “But I say to you, Do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God’s throne; nor by the earth; for it is his footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes’ and your ‘No’ ‘No’...” [Matthew 5.33-37].

The most common way of misusing the name of God in those days was taking an oath and failing to keep their word. So let ‘yes’ be ‘yes’ and ‘no’ be ‘no’ for anything more this that may result in the sin of breaking the third commandment.

There is no question then that the ten commandments are endorsed by Christ's teaching and are relevant today. Even the fourth commandment has relevance in the believer's life. However, we are not commanded to keep the Sabbath day now in the same way as the Jews



were required to observe it. Like many other aspects of the Law it was 'a shadow of things to come' [Colossians 2.16,17] (For a fuller consideration of the Sabbath Law see previous article in this series - volume 19.1 page 17).

To sum up, we can do no better than refer to Paul's letter to the First Century Christians at Rome concerning the commandments, words that have not lost their relevance for believers nearly 2,000 years later:

'Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another hath fulfilled the law. For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, You shall not covet," and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." Love does no harm to a neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilment of the law. And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for **now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed.**' The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us **cast off the works of darkness**, and let us put on the armour of light' [Romans 13.8-12].

The Apostle Paul is referring to the most important event in the believers' lives in the words above: '**now is our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.**' The event is of course the return of the Lord Jesus Christ to set up the Kingdom of God on earth. Then the followers of Jesus who have kept his commandments and '**cast off the works of darkness**' will hear these words from the lips of their Lord:

'Come you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world' [Matthew 25.34].

John Weygang  
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# What the Bible says about...

## The Gospel message of Jesus

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MANY PEOPLE ENJOY visiting another country. Some of us may like cultural visits to explore cities and ancient sites with guidebook in hand. A guidebook is essential if we wish to visit different places - it not only tells us how to get there but also gives us background information about our destination - where to go, where to stay and what to see. Sometimes a guidebook is not enough and we need a guide to show us the way and to tell us about the places we will visit.

You may be wondering what has this to do with an article about the Gospel message of Jesus - quite a lot if you think about it. For the teaching of Jesus concerned the ultimate destination for the discerning traveller - it concerned the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is the only really worthwhile destination to go to - in fact you could say it is a destination beyond our wildest dreams. You won't find it shown on a modern map and you won't find a description of it in a brochure at a travel agent. However, like any other destination, if you want to get to the Kingdom of God you need to prepare for the journey. But even before that, there are a few basic questions that need to be asked:

- Where is it?
- Who is its king?
- What will it be like if we get there?
- What preparations need to be made beforehand?

In order to find the answers to these questions we have to turn to a rather special guidebook. In the Bible, the first book in the New Testament tells us that Jesus had just commenced preaching at Capernaum, a town by the Sea of Galilee. If you were to travel to Israel you could still see the ruins of this place today on the shores of Galilee – it's amazing to think that 2,000 years ago Jesus was also there. Sadly with all the turmoil in the Middle East at present, many people don't choose to visit Israel – but in the future things will be different.

The urgency of the message of Jesus was immediately clear to his hearers: *'Repent'* he said, *'for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'* [Matthew 4.17]. As you can imagine there were mixed reactions to this message but some of his hearers responded positively to the words of Jesus. Some like Peter, Andrew, James and John became his disciples. Afterwards *'Jesus went about all Galilee teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people'* [Matthew 4.23]. This message is the theme of all four Gospel records and it also features very prominently in the rest of the New Testament

But before we think about the answers to the four questions we posed at the start, it would be helpful to understand what is meant by *'the gospel of the kingdom'*. The word *'gospel'* is derived from two old English words, which literally mean *'a good story'* or *'good news'*. It is not used much these days but sometimes you may hear someone say something like *'take my word as gospel'*. What they are really trying to say is that they are not lying – there is no question about the truth of their words. However, we are concerned with words of Jesus – he always spoke the truth with authority and his message was from God, as he said on one occasion: *'As my Father taught me, I speak these things'*. [John 8.28].

In the Greek of the New Testament the word *'gospel'* is used 72 times which is an indication of its importance – it's a key part of the Christian message. Today the Bible for the most part is a closed book. People look elsewhere for satisfaction in life but there isn't much good



news. Has the message lost its force nearly 2,000 years after it was spoken?

Jesus had a unique message for his 1<sup>st</sup> Century hearers. It was really good news and had a dramatic and immediate effect – for *'his fame went throughout all Syria'* and *'great multitudes followed him'* [Matthew 4.24,25]. But more than this was the force of the message which he spoke. For many years the Jews had not only experienced the harsh occupation of their country by the Romans, but also their national religion had been turned into a sham - mere ritual and man-made commandments by the religious leaders. Jesus focussed on this particularly when he told the people about the Kingdom of God. He said to them: *'unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven'* [Matthew 5.20].

Truly this was a special message. Jesus did not tell them to organise a national rebellion against the Roman authorities but rather he told them to break free from the hypocrisy of their religious leaders. He told them to look instead for God's kingdom to come, for this was their only hope for the future; no time was to be lost in preparing for the coming Kingdom. There was no mistaking the urgency of the message - a personal, inner transformation was the key to the inheritance of the Kingdom of God and that process had to begin at once. We read that when Jesus had finished speaking *'the people were astonished at his teaching'* [Matthew 7.28].

#### WHERE IS THE KINGDOM OF GOD?

What did Jesus mean by this phrase *'the kingdom of heaven'* or *'the kingdom of God'*? How did his hearers understand this message? Is it a literal place? Is it here on earth or is it somewhere else?

Our guidebook supplies the answer to these questions. Think first of all about the model prayer of Jesus, universally known as the Lord's prayer. This tells us that the kingdom was a heavenly kingdom because it was God's kingdom. People all over the world recite these words

many times without ever thinking about what they might really mean. Note the words carefully - *'thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven'* [Matthew 6.10]. This prayer contains a specific request for God's kingdom to be set up on earth so that God's will may be done on earth in the same way as it is now done in heaven by the angels.

The teaching of Jesus concerning this coming kingdom on earth was nothing new because it was also the message of the Old Testament. The first indications of this are found right back in the first book of the Bible. There we find that the Jewish patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were promised by God an inheritance in the land of Canaan (now Israel), as a reward for their faithfulness. God said to Abraham: *'Lift your eyes now and look from the place where you are - northward, southward, eastward, and westward; for all the land which you see, I give to you and your descendants for ever. Arise, walk in the land through its length and its width for I give it to you'* [Genesis 13.14,15,17]. The promise was repeated to Abraham's descendants - to Isaac and to Jacob the father of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Although those Jewish Patriarchs lived in that land, they died there too and they never actually possessed any part of it during their lifetimes. In the letter to the Hebrews the writer comments on this in these words: *'By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would afterwards receive as an inheritance... By faith he sojourned in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God'* [Hebrews 11.8-10].

It is a promise that still awaits fulfilment at God's appointed time in the future for Jesus reminded his hearers that *'many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven'* [Matthew 8.11]. The Bible tells us about the faith of men and women in ancient times who like Abraham, looked for the coming kingdom. We read that *'These all died in faith, not having*

*received the promises, but having seen them afar off...And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country...' [Hebrews 11.13-16].*

The kingdom will indeed be heavenly in the sense that it is God's kingdom - but there is no doubt about it being set up on earth. This is what God promised to Abraham, to Sarah his wife, to Isaac and Jacob, to Moses, David and all those other men and women who lived their lives and died in faith - there's a list of some of them in Hebrews chapter 11.

If you believe God's Word the Bible, there can be no doubt about the answer to the first question - **the coming Kingdom of God will be on earth.**

#### WHO IS ITS KING?

Every kingdom must have a king. The kingdom of God will be no exception. The guidebook leaves us in no doubt about the identity of its king. What did Jesus say to Pilate the Roman governor, when he was standing trial for his life? Pilate asked him a question: '*Are you a king then?*' and Jesus replied '*You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world...*' [John 18.37].

The city of Jerusalem which is so much in the news at present, was the place where the ancient kings of Israel reigned. In reality, God was king and the children of Israel were constituted the Kingdom of God [Exodus 19.3-6; 1 Samuel 8.4-8]. David was perhaps the most famous of those kings and he was promised a descendant who would sit on his throne forever. Did this ever happen? No - Israel has not had a king for some 2,500 years. In fact, the last of the long line of kings that followed David was told by the prophet Ezekiel concerning his kingdom: '*...It shall be no longer until he comes whose right it is, and I will give it to him*' [Ezekiel 21.27].



Who is the one who has the right to occupy David's throne in Jerusalem? The well-known words of the prophet Isaiah leave us in no doubt:

'For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder. And his name will be called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over his kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even for ever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this' [Isaiah 9.6,7].

Here then is the answer to our question about the identity of the King - it is Jesus Christ himself, the one who preached the Gospel, the good news about the coming Kingdom of God.

#### WHAT WILL IT BE LIKE IF WE GET THERE?

The guidebook doesn't leave us without providing more details about the Kingdom of God. There are many references to this throughout the pages of the Bible. In the Old Testament there are word pictures which describe the beauty of God's heavenly kingdom on earth. The words of the prophet Isaiah contrast the world as it is now, the problems which present leaders are facing, with the world as it will be when the Kingdom of God is established. Read the following passages carefully:

- |                        |                                  |
|------------------------|----------------------------------|
| ■ Concerning worship   | - Isaiah chapter 2 verses 1-4    |
| ■ Concerning the king  | - Isaiah chapter 11 verses 1-10  |
| ■ Concerning security  | - Isaiah chapter 32 verses 16-18 |
| ■ Concerning Jerusalem | - Isaiah chapter 65 verses 17-19 |

Note the reference from Isaiah chapter 65 concerning Jerusalem. It will not always be the subject of international disagreement but will be the capital city of God's kingdom on earth. What will it be like? God's Word has supplied the answer - the world in which we live will be changed beyond recognition. Human government will be replaced by Divine rule and all that is wrong with this world will be put right.

#### WHAT PREPARATIONS NEED TO BE MADE BEFOREHAND?

Earlier we referred to those men of faith like Abraham and David and so many others – men and women whose lives are recorded in the Bible as examples for us to think about– they had one great priority in their lives. The followers of Jesus, the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Christians, looked for God's Kingdom more than anything else. They were prepared to give up everything this life had to offer in order to get there. The object of Jesus' teaching was to enable his hearers to re-focus their lives - and there still is every reason to do so.

Coming back to the analogy of the holiday guide - preparation is required (a list of things to take, passports, visas, injections etc). It's foolish to go mountain climbing in the Himalayas with only shirts and shorts to wear – it's foolish to sit in the hot sun for any length of time without protection from its harmful rays. In his teaching, Jesus likened the kingdom of God to a wedding feast. The guests arrived and one man came who was not dressed for the occasion - what happened to him? He was ejected! [Matthew 22.1-14].

We all have a choice – we can prepare for that great event now or we can 'do our own thing' to use a modern phrase and where will that lead us? In a sense we are all on a journey - we are travelling to a destination. Jesus spoke about the broad way, which leads to death and the narrow path, which leads to life. He said '*...narrow is the gate and difficult is the way that leads to life, and few there be that find it*' [Matthew 7.13,14].

At the end of Hebrews chapter 11 we read some words, which reinforce the reality of that future kingdom and give great assurance for those who seek it now. Some 2,000 years have passed since these words were written but the message is no less powerful:

'And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise. God having provided something better for us that they should not be made perfect apart from us' [*Hebrews 11.39,40*].

For many people, the present life is filled with good things and the anticipation that they will continue. On one occasion Jesus encountered a young man who appeared sincere and receptive to the concept of unending life in the kingdom of God. It seemed also that he was a God fearing man: '*All these things*' he said, '*I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?* Jesus said to him, *if you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me*'. It proved too big a price to pay, for we read that '*he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions*' [*Matthew 19.20-22*].

For many others, though, the present life is a continual struggle. Long hours of hard work are needed to provide for the necessities of life. Jesus had an answer to this problem too; much of his time and attention was taken up teaching people with these sorts of pressures – the poor of this world. They were the ones most likely to respond to the Gospel message rather than those already satisfied with their present situation. Jesus said: '*...do not worry, saying, What shall we eat? or What shall we drink?*' or '*What shall we wear?*' For after all these things the Gentiles seek...*But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you*' [*Matthew 6.31-33*].

That seeking which Jesus spoke about has to be an active ingredient in our lives. This involves seeking '*his righteousness*' too.

The need for preparation was constantly emphasised in Jesus' teaching. It was not just because God had promised to care for his children in this present life, but more importantly - because the present life could end at any time! And sooner or later, the kingdom will come. The important question was and still is – will you be prepared for it? Will you be ready?

There is a wonderful future ahead which God has prepared for those who seek him. That's the message of the Gospel – the good news of God's coming kingdom on earth. Are you prepared to give it first priority? Now is the time of opportunity - now is the time to assess your own position in the light of Jesus' teaching - to consider the examples of those who obeyed the call of the Gospel in the past, to believe the Gospel of the Kingdom, to be baptised as Jesus commanded [*Mark 16.16*] and to follow the Bible, the guidebook to life very closely with your eyes firmly fixed on the place where you are going.

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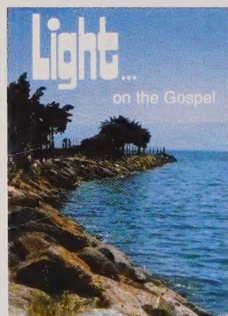


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